

NUGGET SURFERS

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Nobody is a born surfer. It's a sport you have to learn and work at. Everyone starts as a beginner. The problem is, beginners don't always realize they're beginners. It's too easy to envision slicing smoothly through a tube in a cool wetsuit in the California sun. That's how three of my squadron buddies and I saw ourselves one day in late April on a surfing outing in Del Mar, Calif.

It was what experienced surfers call an "epic" day—bright, unobstructed sunlight, with a light offshore breeze. The waves were pushing close to double overheads and peeling into excellent tubes. Combine that action with the scenic beauty of the cliffs, and you had a surfer's dream.

For those of you who haven't surfed, the hardest part is not catching a wave, or actually riding one. It's paddling through the waves, especially on a big day. One of us was an experienced surfer; the rest were nuggets—beginners. We nuggets spent the first 20 minutes paddling through the surf hoping to catch a big wave. I don't know what we would have done if we had, because we were exhausted from all that paddling.

We finally settled for riding shore breaks (that last crumble of a wave before it completely fades into foam). Thirty minutes of that, and I was ready for a breather. It was good to just sit on my board on shore and talk with one of my fellow surf nuggets about how good we soon would be. When our other two friends joined us, three of us decided to have one last go. We ran to the water's edge, tossed our boards to the sea, and flopped on.

By this time, the waves were beginning to wane a bit. We paddled through the shore break and set our sights on some deeper waves. When you're paddling out and a wave breaks on you, it will send you back closer to shore than you already were. You have three ways to prevent that. You can roll under your board (old school of long boarding). You can try to go over the wave (usually unsuccessful). Or, you

can "duck dive" the wave (lower the nose of your board and go under the wave).

We had started out three abreast, but I was tired and was having trouble keeping up. As we came to the first wave we had to pass, my two friends were side by side, while I was behind and slightly to the right. The wave began to break, and I started to duck dive. Just as I started under, I caught a glimpse of the other nugget. He was trying to go over the wave, and it wasn't working. In a split second, I saw him get knocked off his board and saw his board come flying toward me. I slipped off my board, covered my head and sank as quickly as possible, but not quickly enough. His board slammed me on my head. I stood up in the water, held my head and insisted I was fine; I just needed to rest.



ON THE LOOSE


Hang Forty

As I walked to the cliffs, I noticed a small drop of blood on my chest, but I couldn't locate its source. I told my friend ashore what happened and then went to rinse off my board. As I bent down at the water's edge, I saw more blood. Still, I thought nothing of it. Finally, as I returned once more to the cliffs, my friend looked at me as if I was a sea monster. Bright red blood covered the left side of my face and was streaming down my wetsuit. I hadn't noticed I was bleeding because I was already wet from sea water. The fin of my buddy's board had left a 1-inch gash in my skull.

We decided to call it a day and get me to an emergency room. While we were walking to our car, we came across an ambulance and saw paramedics strapping some torturous-looking device on another

surfer's neck. It turned out that he too was a beginner who had bitten off more than he could chew. Compared to him, I was lucky. I only had to have two staples in my scalp, a shaved spot, and a good story to tell friends.

Now I know my limits in the water. I still surf but mainly on days when the waves are smaller and I can handle my board. I also never surf alone. I know of two of my buddies who were surfing solo—they almost died solo, also.

But you know, I still can see the Beach Boys standing on shore, singing their lungs out, and Frankie and Annette cheering me on, while I cut through one of those radical tubes on an epic surfing day. Maybe someday. 

In a split second, I saw him get knocked off his board and saw his board come flying toward me.